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Dr. Henry Kissinger On The Major Challenges Facing The World

Kiril Sokoloff & Dr. Henry Kissinger | Interview Transcript | *Filmed on February 23, 2023*

Dr. Henry Kissinger, widely regarded as one of the most important geopolitical strategists of the 20th century, talks to Kiril Sokoloff about some of the truly unprecedented challenges facing the world in the 21st century. He offers his advice to today's leaders and explores what makes a great leader. He also discusses the New World Order, the emerging multipolar world and the instability it is likely to bring, the similarities to 1914, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the dangers of AI.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Henry, it's a great pleasure to be with you. We've had many wonderful conversations. and there are a lot of interesting topics that I would like to cover with you. You are a student of history, and as you have said, "history is the memory of states." Clearly, we are entering into a multi-polar world with enormous instability. It has been said that COVID was the first real test of our global civilization in the 21st century and that the world failed. Can you please give your thoughts on the shaping and development of the New World Order?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, the New World Order, it's composed of the Atlantic world. And the novelty in it is that it now includes Asia—of course Japan was in it before World War II. It has now many nations and regions of a different culture, which means that their interpretation of their security and of their progress, it's not necessarily identical with that of European history. And so, to achieve a common view, it's more difficult by far than it used to be. And even in the purely European-American culture, wars were a constant element of the situation. So, we have a novel problem now. And the problem, which is compounded by the fact that we have weapons of a power that was unimaginable until the end of WWII, and they have now developed through it, artificial intelligence and sophistication that one could not even conceive until the last decade. All these elements together create an unprecedented situation.

Kiril Sokoloff:

How has your great study of history enabled you to see the world more clearly than others? As Winston Churchill said, "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." You once said: "It is not often that nations learn from the past, even rarer that they draw the correct conclusions from it." What advice would you give to world leaders today? And what advice would you offer to people who are trying to understand the world that lies ahead?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, Winston Churchill, when he was asked by a student at a university how he could prepare himself for a leadership role in government, he answered, "Study history, study history, study history." Those are the three main pieces of advice I could give you. The problem is that the interpretation of history in various cultures is different. And in America at least, the study of history is being reduced rather than expanded. I compared the catalog at Harvard on history, when I was there, with that of my granddaughter when she was there. And it's less than half of the subjects that were taught at that time. But if you don't develop a feel for the unavoidable and the inherent momentum that history provides, you cannot interpret events properly. And that's the difficulty of most of our statesmen today, especially in the West.

Kiril Sokoloff :

Henry, you're going to be a hundred years old in May. Congratulations, a remarkable achievement.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

My contribution to that was that I chose my parents well. That their genes must have contributed greatly to that.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Well, you've maintained an astounding intellectual vigor and your memory is phenomenal, it puts us all to shame. Besides your genes, what is your secret?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

First of all, I did not do it deliberately, although I welcome it. But I think I have noticed in so many CEOs who retire and then other things start falling apart because they're bored and not active. They're used to having great activities, it's not just the power.

So, if you are not active in current problems, your incentive to understand their source in history is less. In so far as I contributed to my long age, it is that I have had the good fortune to be able to do the things that fascinate me in their own right and not just as a means of earning a living, that I could be involved in those. And I have not retired, and I don't intend to.

Kiril Sokoloff:

No one took your retirement seriously.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

No. I work on the problems that I think are important and that's basically the purpose of my activity. And what is important now is to develop a world order in conditions of extreme danger and of extreme complexity. And that is a huge challenge for the world. My contribution, such as it is, is through books, conversations and activity on problems that I think are important.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Well, on this very subject in your book *World Order*, you discussed that today's multi-national institutions were created without input from the largest countries by population. And how would you suggest we update these multi-national institutions?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

The institutions that were created at the end of WWII performed an adequate role as long as the problems were WWII-type problems. But now the economic inter-relationship of the world is so intense, and the impact of some of the developments on different countries so varied, that, at least on economic issues,

it is important to bring the influence of countries and international institutions in line with the magnitude of the role that they have. I think this will almost inevitably happen in the next decades. But the economic role of countries is not identical with the military and diplomatic role each country plays. So, on issues that are on the table today, like the future of Ukraine, and above all the future of Ukraine-Russian-European relations, the influence of countries is not determined by their economic percentage totally, but importantly also by their geographic location and their historic memory. So, each region will have a different balance and all of them are—not all of them, but many of them are—in the process of being rethought.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Do you think that there is a means of creating these new institutions that will evolve peacefully or does there have to be a major crisis and out of that crisis comes a new set of institutions?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, I think historically that the fundamental changes have occurred at the end of conflicts. But conflicts with modern weapons enhanced by modern technology are bound to be disastrous for the countries involved, and will therefore bring about extraordinary dislocations. So, under present conditions, I have argued, and continue to believe, that the major countries, for example, China and the United States, need to discuss with each other—how to avoid a high-tech war between them. And that cannot be done by waiting for the moment of crisis. That must be done ahead of time by some form of permanent consultation. And it's really the essence also of the Ukrainian war and there's no shortage of conflict around the world. So that is usually the starting point. Ideally, it would be best, and it should be necessary, to have the relationship between major powers arranged in principle before they slip into crises. That is what the future demands. But the past may teach different lessons.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Yes. Well, right now tensions are rising. There seems to be no de-escalation anywhere. And whether it's China-US, US-Russia, how can we de-escalate? How can we bring things back to some sort of equilibrium?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, if there is a war, it has to be ended at some point, and therefore, there will be a negotiation. The challenge is, can you have the negotiation without war? And will people be wise enough to assign the appropriate influence in advance? And appropriate means, in my mind, not only the economic role the nation plays, but it's almost by instinct what history teaches it. When you look, at say, China and the United States, the United States history does not involve until very recently, a permanent threat on the territory of the United States. So, for the United States, the problems of the world are incidents that interrupt a normal harmony, and if foreign policy is conceived—in terms of what the instinct leaders feel—is conceived as a succession of the solution of problems, therefore the negotiation style is extremely pragmatic.

On the Chinese side, there is an instinct, by comparison, that no problem ever has a final solution, that every solution is an entrance to another set of problems. So, the Chinese are less focused on the immediate issue, or will include in their consideration of the immediate issue a view of where whatever they're engaged in is going. And so, they will be having more medium-term and long-term objectives in mind than Americans. So, to match these two is one of the big enterprises if one is thinking of world order.

Kiril Sokoloff:

In 1914, the King of England, the Kaiser and the Czar were all first cousins and there was considerable friendships and communication and understanding between all of them. It seems to me as we look at the world today with how Putin is being seen and President Xi is being seen that we don't have that kind of relationship that we had in 1914. So, it's a more dangerous time because personal relationships can help in the time of stress.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, the outbreak and conduct of WWI is one of the key issues that people ought to study because here was a society and a set of cultures that had conflict, but no overriding cultural conflicts with each other. And as you say, the royal families were related by blood with each other. And yet, they slid into a war that destroyed the essence of European dominance in the world, which it has

never been able to recover. And the fascinating aspect of it is, on July 1st, 1914, nobody thought any crisis was occurring. Then the Crown Prince of Austria was murdered and then still nothing happened for two weeks. And then within a week a crisis that started in the Balkans wound up with a German invasion of Belgium, which had nothing to do with any of it, because the strategic plans of the major powers required that they act as soon as mobilization started. So, the technology had gotten totally out of whack with the political purposes. And then they couldn't end it. In 1916, after two years of war, 2 million people having already been killed, some of the major powers tried to settle it on the basis of peace without victory. But they were afraid to do it because their public would then rebel against a war that had already caused 2 million and had no benefits. So, they went on another two years, lost 3 million more people and destroyed their whole structure.

It's a lesson we should reflect upon because if you combine the destructiveness of weapons that nuclear power provides with the accuracy of them, that artificial intelligence provides, and the sophistication of the technology that combines all these things, overwhelming destruction in a war between high-tech countries is unavoidable, even in the sense that the leaders may lose control because the weapons themselves will have automatic features for self-defense that drive them into escalation. So that is the world in which we live. And I've mentioned 1916 only to show what could happen in a world which had "baby arms" compared to what we have. That's a big challenge. Now then, the key question is, can the leaders of the world reconcile their thinking on that basis? Or are they so driven by the domestic momentum that exists into handling this challenge primarily in the short-term?

Kiril Sokoloff:

That is of great concern. Moving on to AI, as you brought up, and you wrote a wonderful book with Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher and wrote a deeply insightful article in *The Atlantic Monthly* on your concerns. And you compared it to the Enlightenment and now the end of the Enlightenment. And of course, the Enlightenment started with philosophical insights that were spread by new technology. But today we're moving in the opposite direction. We have a potentially dominating-technology in search of a guiding philosophy. And the question for the world is, what will become of human consciousness if its

own explanatory power is surpassed by AI and societies are no longer able to interpret the world that we live in in terms that are meaningful to us?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, I'm writing an article together with Eric Schmidt and Dan Huttenlocher, which will appear in a couple of days, on exactly this problem—that we not only have the conceptual problems that we are talking about—we are now in a position to converse with machines. And the machines have an identity whose origin we don't know and draw conclusions that we have to learn. We are only at the very, very beginning of that process of talking to machines. But in 10 years it will be a major factor in the economy of every highly-developed country and, in some way, will strongly influence the leaders because it will be one of their ways of getting information. That's a world that's totally new and for which there is no intellectual preparation, which means that we have to create it ourselves.

And I don't pretend to know how that will happen, but if you look at the history of the human race, great advances have occurred when visionary thinking was combined with technical capability and human restraint. If one wanted to look at the periods of creativity primarily. That is a big task and not easily—easily is not the right word for it—it's a challenging task that needs Churchillian types to lead us. But in the Western world, these types become more and more rare.

Kiril Sokoloff:

We've had many conversations about AI, and I've expressed my concern that the powers of machine learning could fall into the hands of the dark forces. And as Eric Schmidt recently said in an interview, when he was involved with the creation of the internet, no one thought that criminals would exploit it. And in the early networks, they didn't even have passwords. So, this same naivete seems to be applying with the advent of AI. What do we do?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, in order to handle this well, you need technology and vision. But when you look at the Enlightenment, there were extraordinary technological developments then in terms of what was known—like the printing press, which changed communications among people by making the transportation and

creation of ideas—or the perpetuation of ideas—relatively simple. But side by side with that, you had a philosopher group of extraordinary distinction that grew out of the medieval, religiously-based period. And these philosophers either challenged the existing system or they tried to find a compromise or a solution to uplift it. And so, for about 300 years, Europe had the good fortune to come back between these two groups, and then cooperation between these two groups, to evolve their thinking.

But it was not an easy process because...Not easy is an understatement. There was a 30-year war that devastated Europe. But out of that war emerged such concepts as sovereignty, and some concepts of international principles and law, that then for 300 years permitted the evolution of both fields, and which then with Einstein, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principles led to some limits, some enormous discoveries, but also some limits. But we don't have the philosophers. Our technicians understand so much more than we do as statesmen and as thinkers. And they're producing things like the possibility of dialogue with machines, which they're doing right now, and successfully, in terms of that task. So, for that world, we have no great philosophers. And when we look at our educational systems, they are much more concerned with teaching how to survive, to get ahead in that short-term world than reflections about the decisions that children and grandchildren will have to make. So that is an unprecedented challenge for humanity.

And as we said before, there are differences in cultural perception to begin with, so that even just trying to understand these things in a non-competitive way will require huge efforts. So, we need to generate leaders who understand this and followers who feel the need for this. And to match this will be a great task, especially for democratic countries and for the future of democracy. But on the other hand, the authoritarian countries are limited by the inherent perspective of a human life and have enormous difficulty of achieving continuity.

Kiril Sokoloff:

How can one understand Russia without understanding the 28 million Russians who were killed in WWII, or understand China without the Century of Humiliation? And so how can you run a foreign policy without having historical knowledge and empathy for what happened?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, I don't know. There is no theory because it's never been done. Of course, one can have agreements between Russia and the West or with Russia and other countries. But if they are to last, then both cultures, or any of the cultures involved, have to feel comfortable, have to feel it includes part of what they are after, and/or they have to lift up their own thinking to the new reality that's about to happen.

But if you look at the Ukraine situation, there are a variety of perspectives. Ukraine understandably and inevitably wants to have space in which to live, and the resources for rebuilding and recovery. At the same time, the European order for 400 years has included a significant Russia.

Now how to combine these two? And how to bring each of these countries to the realization that what I've just said about the independence of one and the strength of the other, how they have to be brought into relation with each other. That's extremely difficult, even to be accepted as a problem.

And then if you take the surrounding cultures, China, India, Middle East, all of which have a piece of this action in their future, I haven't heard anybody state a solution to this. And the conduct of the leaders in office is mostly focused on their immediate problems, including their electoral problem. But if they don't solve it on the Ukraine issue within the next year or two, that could take on the dimensions of WWI.

Kiril Sokoloff:

That's absolutely right. I've studied WWI a lot, and circumstances don't seem to favor the present. And particularly with all these new technologies, what becomes so apparent was that the power of the artillery that had been developed since the Franco-Prussian War was not understood and known. Similarly, we have these new technologies that we don't understand and of course, that's exactly where the problem comes, you don't understand the consequences.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, and all of this happened between European countries...we're talking about WWI now. But the present world includes India, China, Brazil, and major countries that have a totally different memory.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Do you think that democracy can exist in all countries? Or are there some countries for whom it is not suited or may not be suited in this decade or the next decade or the next 100 years? And if so, trying to force democracy when it's having its own challenges in many parts of the world may be not a wise choice. How does one stop this process where you're trying to democratize and creating stresses when the countries involved may not want to go down there?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, you raise extremely acute questions. But since you are a student of history, it isn't always the case that the definition of a problem helps you to solve it. Immanuel Kant, who grew out of the Enlightenment we were talking about before, and who was a great believer in constitutional and democratic government, wrote an essay on war in which he had said, "The world is organically going to be driven towards some kind of consolidation." But the open question was whether it would get there by human insight or by catastrophes of a magnitude that permitted no other solution. Well, we are not on the first road. We are not on the road of human insight at the moment.

You asked the question about the future of democracy. Somebody like myself—and I suspect you—who has lived in autocratic societies, and especially those of the modern period with the modern technology, it's no question about the importance of democracy and about commitment to democracy.

But it's also true historically that as an institution, democracy has been the shortest-lived institutional system, when it happened, when you compare it to monarchies. The reason for that is that it is very difficult to maintain the strengths that are needed, when the temptation to be demagogic is so great. Aristotle already wrote about that, in different words, but with that meaning.

So now any American president who has an election coming up, in the electoral period, must have a very short-term perspective. Because the long-term perspective deals, if it's real, with realities that are not even fully existing yet, plus some, like nuclear weapons, that are variances.

But for example, now in Ukraine we have a problem, how to safeguard Russia's nuclear weapons? In other words, how we can avoid the use of nuclear weapons when the survival of countries is deliberately under stress? So, you and I can only describe this as a problem. But that's the reality in which we now live. And which you and I—I mean, people discussing these things philosophically—we can call attention to it, but we won't be doing it.

Kiril Sokoloff:

So true. One of the things that's worried me for many years, is how do we educate our children and grandchildren for this new world? Machines can do almost everything better than humans and how do we educate them? And from my understanding the education process hasn't changed at all. We're still educating the same way. How do we retain our humanity in a world where machines are becoming more and more dominant and the value of humans is declining?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

I think the education process in the Western world, at least in America, has gotten worse. It has because it has gotten away from the long-term problems and gotten very focused on the short-term ones. And very much on ideological grounds, not rational and reflective grounds.

So, I fear what you and I are doing today is stating problems that call for leadership, and the political processes are geared to short-term solutions. You won't hear any electoral debate in America, reflections on what we are talking about right now because the public isn't prepared for that. When you look at our educational system, I don't think that people in universities today are being educated for this long-term perspective.

Kiril Sokoloff:

You once said, in my opinion brilliantly, that “most foreign policies that history has applauded in whatever country, were originated by leaders who were opposed by experts.” Along these same lines, how can we create leaders who have the courage, vision, and confidence to ignore the experts?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, we have to hope, and we have to expect, that leaders will emerge, that groups will be formed that call attention to these problems.

And that out of these groups will emerge a political consciousness of what needs to be done. And such a process is going on, I think. And then you have the public. The public in many countries feel restive. The role of a leader is to take the society from where it is to where it has not been because the world has changed or will change. And the great leaders have known that, and that is their contribution. And if these leaders emerge then the society can make a still difficult but stabler progress. But if these leaders don't emerge, then the political structure in countries will get more and more soft and unmanageable and will itself become a problem. But one has to hope, and do what one can, to bring about the sort of dialogue between the leaders and the led and to produce leaders with this sort of vision. But it would be incorrect to say that they exist at this particular moment. At this moment, we are in a period of enormous change, which is often recognized only demagogically—demagogically meaning that one picks the issue that achieves a very immediate response but does not help you towards a solution. We have to transcend this. You know, it's possible to diagnose problems without solving them.

Kiril Sokoloff:

These leaders you've referred to, are they born or are they made by circumstances?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, they're importantly made by circumstances. But also importantly made by their education and by their own attitudes. If you study the history of great leaders, they have transcended their times. And that is not yet happening.

And therefore, they are thrown into the conflict with each other without the framework that would make it meaningful.

Kiril Sokoloff:

You said that Richard Nixon “would have been a great, great man had somebody loved him.” You also said “it was a Greek tragedy. Nixon was fulfilling his own nature. Once it started it could not end otherwise.” I’d love to hear more about that.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, I had the privilege of working with Richard Nixon. And the fact that I was working with him is a tribute to his qualities, because before he became President I had worked closely with Nelson Rockefeller, who was a friend of mine and who was politically an opponent of Nixon. Not ideologically, but they both wanted to be President. And Nixon won that contest and then asked me to work with him, which showed that he was interested in ideas. He owed nothing to me politically; he had every reason to have concern.

So, Richard Nixon was a man of some vision and political courage. But he did not know how to handle the domestic situation as well as he did the foreign policy situation. And so, he was engulfed because of, really, his own mistakes... He was a tragedy in that sense. And I think of him in retrospect with great respect. He didn’t deserve the end—much of it he caused himself—on the major issues, which is the essence of tragedy, and which after his retirement he acknowledged.

Kiril Sokoloff:

You have said “In crises, the most daring course is often safest.” And would you give us some examples of that?

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, in theory, the safest course is to do the right thing. That is to get away from the noise and to ask yourself what are the various actors in the crisis trying to do, compared to what is best for the survival and progress of the whole system. That’s the idea. But the reality is that top policy makers are so busy dealing with

the immediate and then dealing with their domestic situation and then dealing with the gap between what they learn and what their surrounding can absorb that we haven't yet found the leader who can make these jumps.

But if you look at people like Lee Kuan Yew in a little country like Singapore, three different races, Malay, Chinese and Indian, three different races. No resources whatsoever, none whatsoever. An island without resources. Who said I will trust to the excellence of my people to make a state out of this, and who moved it from a per capita income of \$600 to a current per capita income of \$70,000. It shows you what leadership can still accomplish. Or Charles de Gaulle arriving in England, as the youngest Brigadier General in the French army, arriving in England without resources and without even speaking the language, and becoming the leader of the Free French. And then restoring a sense of identity to France. So, it can be done. But it's not frequent.

Kiril Sokoloff:

You've been wonderful. As always, it's so great to talk to you. And thank you so much for spending the time with me today.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, it's a joy to see you, as always. And come back here before I leave at the end of March if you can.

Kiril Sokoloff:

I'll do my very best to get down to see you and spend some time with you. Thank you again. And get some rest. And you're amazing to have written two books when you're 99 years old. It's a challenge for all of us.

Dr. Henry Kissinger:

Well, thank you.

Kiril Sokoloff:

Okay. Have a good afternoon.



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